

# WHY WILL PERLA SAY?

By RUPERT HUGHES

With Illustrations by James Montgomery Flagg

"I SAY, Persis, I lost track of you in that ghastly mob. I'm sorry. By the way, wasn't that tall fellow in the uniform the same Lieut. What's-his-name that was honeying around Mrs. Neff?"

Persis was in too fierce a mood to continue that nonsense. She turned on Willie as a she-wolf turns on a terrier at her heels.

"Oh, Lord! Can't I escape you for a moment? Do go somewhere and smoke something. Or if the worst comes to the worst, drink something; but don't stand there making green eyes at me like an ape."

"Green eyes like an ape?" he echoed, stupidly. "Well, I'll be—!" Then an unusual vigor of wrath stirred him. "Look here, Persis! I won't have you make fun of me. I'd rather have you hate me than make a fool of me. I won't be laughed at—I won't!"

Persis groaned with resignation: "Oh, you've ceased to be a laughing matter to me, Willie."

Willie was about to reply in kind, but he gave her a long look and, seeing how beautiful she was, grew more tender. "Everything seems to have ceased to be a laughing matter to you, Persis. What has come over you? Before we were married you were always laughing—at everything, everybody. But from the time we were married you ceased to laugh. Hang it all, married you to cheer me up a bit. What in heaven's name has changed you?"

Before this weakness she relented a little. "Oh, nothing has changed me. Don't worry about me. I'm just a trifle bored with life."

"Suppose you're just tired of me," he sighed, "everlasting me. I must be a nuisance to you. Lord knows I am to myself!"

She looked at him with usually kinder eyes. In contemplating himself he was commending himself. The best approach to a human tribunal, as to a divine, is a humble and a contrite heart. She put out her hand to him, but he did not see it; he set off to find some one to lead him to a Scotch hibernian. And Persis now that she was rid of him, was free to glide forward to the marble bench, where she could see Forbes half concealed in a grotto of shadow and a mood of gloom.

The thought of what she was about to do gave her pause. She realized the atrocity of attempting to keep Forbes in mind when she had taken such solemn vows so publicly. She must be kinder to Willie. She tried to dismiss her conscience by telling herself that it would be childish to run away from Forbes. She caught sight of Mrs. Neff hovering about with the recaptured Alice. She dreaded what interpretation Mrs. Neff would put upon her appearance in the environs of Forbes. She remembered with what fierce criticism she had always met the slightest indiscretions of other married women.

Later she happened upon the surreptitious Rows and learned that Senator Tait and Forbes were leaving Paris in the morning to take the waters somewhere—Vichy, Carlsbad, Marienbad, or Matlock; he was not sure where.

She sent for Willie, and he came with a slight elevation of manner which showed that he had found some one to arrange him at least one Scotch-and-soda.

He was demonstrative in the car and very affectionate in the elevator at the Hotel Maurice, where they were stopping. This did not endear him to Persis. His man exchanged a glance with her maid as they peeled off their wraps. When man and maid had been sent to bed Willie came shuffling into Persis' dressing-room where she sat staring at her doleful beauty in the mirror. He saw how listless she was, and was awkwardly eager to cheer her up. He could not have depressed her more than by trying to cheer her up.

He tried to shake off gloom as a wet spaniel shakes off water. "Oh, I say, Persis, buck up! Don't feel like this. You're so beautiful; you're simply ripping tonight!" He laid his hand on her bare arm. She started at his touch and before she realized it gasped, "Please don't raw me!"

He stared at her, abashed: "Do you hate me as much as I hate you?" "Oh, I don't hate you, Willie! It's myself I hate," Persis cried. "You mustn't mind me! I'm just a little blue and lonely."

He laughed gruesomely. "Bride and groom together on honeymoon, and both terribly lonely! Gad! I wonder if other married couples come to feel this way when the honeymoon turns to green cheese. And do they just blurt it through? It reminds me of that chap in Hogarth's 'Marriage à la Mode,' where the wife is warning the husband to sunbath back in his chair in a dismal stupor. Only he was drunk—I think I'll get drunk!"

He stumbled out to find his usual nepenthe. When he came back her door was locked.

Persis sat in grim communion with her image for hours. She faintly heard her husband's tapping on her door, and calling through it at intervals in thicker and thicker speech. But she was like a far-off rumour from a street. She was in session with herself.

She took her bonnet cap from her hair, and sat in the cascade of it peering through as from a cavern, and smoking always. She was smoking much too much, but she felt a companionship in tobacco. As she held the cap in her hand she thought of Forbes, and the remembrance was so joyous that she vowed to brave the world to get back to him.

Then she pictured how he would look at her when he understood. She imagined him starting back from her as from something abhorrent. She threw a cigarette stub at her face in the mirror and gasped. "Pugh!" She could endure anything better than such cheapening of herself in Forbes' eyes. And after a while she began to think of her self-respect. She had only herself. She must keep that self-respect.

Worn out at last with her silent war, she bent her head on her crossed hands and fell asleep among the fripperies of her dressing-table.

Hours later she woke in broad daylight and crept to bed with tingling arms and aching forehead. She did not wake again till noon. Nichette had tipped about her like a sentinel and kept Willie at a distance. He discharged her a dozen times, but she simply shrugged and snifled and answered him in French too rapid for him to follow or reply to.

When at last Persis sat up with her coffee and croissants on her knees, Nichette read to her the news in the French columns of the Paris Herald. She learned that Ambassador-elect Tait and his entourage had gone to Evian-les-Bains.

Willie came in with new plans for Persis' diversion. He suggested a visit to Switzerland and Lake Geneva. She would have liked to go to the mountains. There was something heroic in them. But Evian was so close to Switzerland. She nobly suggested Norway and Sweden. The thought of fjords and midnight suns and things was also heroic.

In the meanwhile she must make haste to dress for the Prix des Dragons, and she took some interest in the choice of a gown sufficiently striking to insure success in the fierce rivalry of that great costume race.

Every day said that the world had not seen such undressing in public since the Grecian revival at the time of the Directorate. Persis was not the least astounding figure there. She felt that, after a deed of such sacrifice as she had achieved in forswearing love, she had earned an extra license in her draperies.

Willie raised a tempest about her gown, but she said that she had done enough for him. She was suffering that morning-after-sullenness which follows unusual indulgences in virtue as well as other excesses.

Life once more was a tango. She shifted from costume to costume like a dressmaker's model. She went the rounds of the dancings, and musicals, and embassies, town houses, hotels, and chateaux, watering places, and mountains, lakes, and seas. But she kept away from Switzerland till she read that Ambassador-elect Tait was at his desk in Paris; and then she avoided Paris and went to Trouville.

And so the days totaled into weeks, and the weeks became a month, two, three. She fled from boredom to boredom. She skimmed the cream of life and whipped it, and it turned sour. Though her abiding places were all oases and her clothes were of silk, she led only a Redoubtable existence. After all, she was a woman, and she was a woman of the world. She was a woman of the world, and she was a woman of the world.

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## XII--AT THE DEVIL'S BALL

him, "and I knew less than I do now." She waved away to a niche beside a statue where they could talk without being overheard, but, being visible, were chaperoned by the crowd. She sank upon a settle of gold and old rose and motioned him to her side. Then, while her face and her fan proclaimed that their conversation was of the ideal, her voice was deep with elegy:

"Harvey, try to be just. If you had been rich—oh! if you had been rich—then, as you are now, Harvey, then I could have believed that such a thing as a love-match is feasible."

"But I was poor," Forbes reiterated, with a knell-like persistence.

"That was Fate's fault, not mine," said Persis, in all solemnity. "But haven't I been honest with you? You declared that you loved me. I confessed that I loved you."

"Was it honest, then, not to give me your heart?"

"My whole heart has always been yours for the asking—and still is," Forbes recoiled with a sudden. "What are you saying? You have a husband now?"

"What does that prove?" was Persis' grim reply. "I don't owe him anything in the inside of my heart. He didn't buy that, thank God! Before the world, I owe him everything, and I should be the first to abhor any open indiscretion for my ten commandments are condensed to two: 'Don't be indiscreet!' and 'Beware of what people will say!' What more could a husband ask?"

Forbes tossed his hands in despair. He gave her up. She and her creed were beyond his understanding.

"I wasn't bred in your world. I can't understand a thing you have said," he groaned.

She wondered if time had cured Forbes' love. She wondered if time had cured her own. She wondered if time had cured the world.

This was her humor when she met Forbes again. She had tried in various ways to gain invitations to affairs of the Embassy. Tait wasted no diplomacy on cutting out the Embassy. He was the more brutal about this since he felt that he was guarding his daughter's welfare.

And then the Enslaves came to Paris in an unusual snowstorm, and winter set in about the old man's overworked, undermined heart. He did his best to keep Persis and Forbes apart; but when were the old ever vigilant enough to thwart the young?

One day Mrs. Mather Edgecumbe found the Enslaves shivering like a pair of waifs in a restaurant famous for its cuisine and infamous for its heating arrangements. She asked them if they were coming to the dancings she was giving at her home that afternoon. They had forgotten all about it, and Persis pleaded an engagement with her doctor. Mrs. Edgecumbe was "so sorry. There would be hardly any Americans there, then, except the old faithful Ambassador and Capt. Forbes."

Persis' heart warmed instantly, but she said she was afraid that she had some other engagement booked; in any case, they might drop in for a minute. She shivered with exultance and blamed it on the cold.

When 5 o'clock came round Persis carefully remembered the half-promise to Mrs. Mather Edgecumbe. Willie was out of humor. Persis anxiously urged him to stay in his room and nurse his cold. Her unusual thought for his welfare startled him. It delighted him. He decided to stay in his room and nurse his cold. He decided to stay in his room and nurse his cold.

The dancings was a failure in Mrs. Mather Edgecumbe's mind, and in her sister Winifred's heart, for the storm had blown the Parisians away. He pleaded motives of state. But he sent Persis his apologies.

Forbes, having been on a visit in his official capacity, was again in uniform. His eyes and cheeks were aglow from the cold, and Persis watched him with adoration as he came nearer and nearer. He did not see her, even when he came close to Persis. He did not see her, even when he came close to Persis.

Persis was melted by his kinship with her suffering. She leaned so close to him as the perfume whirled around him as he came to her. She leaned so close to him as the perfume whirled around him as he came to her.

And she said, "Harvey, I'm going to tell you a terrible secret that I've hardly dared to tell myself. I—I crossed the ocean to find you!"

He was suffocated with longing for her, and horror of her. He gasped, "My God! on your honeymoon?"

Everywhere in that day there seemed to be a band somewhere playing a turkey-trot. There was such a band here, and such music was to be expected; but there was something whimsical about the fact that the tune this band struck up in now was a rag-time version of "Mendelssohn's Wedding March."

Persis was so eager to be in Forbes' arms again, and the dance was so simple an excuse that she smiled into his mask of horror. "We haven't danced for ever so long."

A waltz of whoops of the violins swept away all such solemn things as honor, decency, duty. He rose and caught her in his embrace. It was the same girlish body, irresistibly warm and girlish. They swung and sidled and hopped with utter cynicism. The only remnant of horror was a foolish, bewildered, muttered: "How could you?"

"Come to Paris!" she asked.

"Because I felt you still loved me as I still love you, and because I thought you were—perhaps—afraid."

"Afraid, eh?" He laughed, his professional soldier's pride on fire. "Well, I don't think you will find me a coward!" And he tightened his arm about her like a vise and spun her so dizzily that, though she was rejoiced by his brutality, the discretion that was her decalogue uttered criticism. The only remnant of horror was a foolish, bewildered, muttered: "How could you?"

She did not know that Ambassador Tait had come in and had watched the vortex, was watching now with terror

the look on Forbes' face and her answering smile.

Persis, ignorant of his espionage, sighed. "Oh, it is wonderful to be together again!"

"Wonderful," Forbes panted. "But it is in a crowd, and you are married!"

"That does not mean that I am never to see you alone, does it?" she asked, anxiously and challengingly.

Forbes was still wise enough and well enough aware of his own passion to say, "But discovery and scandal would be the only result."

"Not if we were very discreet," Persis pleaded, thinking of those lonely months.

"But your husband?"

Persis uttered that ugly old truth. "If we can evade gossip abroad, we shall be safe enough at home."

And as if in object-lesson, Willie Enslave jogged up the very moment. He showed the influence of mild tipping on a limited capacity, and, coming forward, shook hands foolishly and forcibly with Capt. Forbes. "How d'ye do—Mr. Ward," he drawled.

"Capt. Forbes, dear," Persis corrected. "That's right. I always was an ass about names, Mr. Ward. I haven't seen you for years and years, have we? Have you met my wife? Oh, of course you have."

Forbes was revolted. There was something loathsome about the little face, Enslave reminded him of the clown in "Pagliacci," and Persis, like another Nedda, was determined to finish the scene. She tucked her fan under her thigh, she said with innocent voice: "Oh, Willie, I've lost my fan somewhere; would you mind looking for it?"

Obediently Enslave turned and wandered about, scanning the floor carefully and

shorting idiotically. "Fan, fan, who's got the fan?" And so he floated harmlessly and blindly out of the cloud that was thickening around his household.

But now she was confronted by an adversary of more weight and account than Willie, a man whose trade was diplomacy and politics. Ambassador Tait came forward. He was a little pale and weak, and he felt his heart laboring in his breast. He had at least one more good fight in him, and when he found Forbes plainly enmeshed, though struggling, in Persis' gossamer web, the old man resolved to make the fight at whatever cost.

After a moment of hesitation he came briskly forward with a blint: "Pardon me a moment, Mrs. Enslave. I have an important communication for the captain. These state secrets, you know."

And he led Forbes to an adjoining room, the library, where he said in a low tone, "Harvey, my boy, I've cooked up an imaginary errand to get you away from her."

But Forbes tossed his head at this aspersion on his ability to take care of himself. He answered, "I'm not afraid."

Tait's eyes grew very sad, though his lips smiled when he said: "Well, I'm afraid for you. You're not responsible when you're in her magnetic circle."

Then, seeing that Persis had resolutely followed them into the room, he raised his voice for Persis' benefit: "You'll find the papers on my desk. Read them carefully and sign them if they're all right. They must be mailed this evening." Then he deliberately pushed the reluctant and faltering captain from the room, hardly leaving him time to say, "You'll excuse me, Mrs. Enslave. I'll be back in a moment."

But she would not surrender him so easily. She called after Forbes, "I'll expect you back as soon as you have signed those—alleged papers."

The Ambassador was jolted. He could think of nothing to say. He watched Forbes go, then started to follow; noted that Persis was alone, and remembered the laws of courtesy enough to ask:

"May I send you an ice—or your husband?"

"An ice—or my husband?" Persis was forced to smile at such a colloquy. "Neither, please. Sit down, Ambassador."

Tait had not expected this. With a hesitating "Er—Thank you," he seated himself as far as possible from her on a leather divan. Immediately she rose, crossed the room, and sat next to him. There was no escaping her now, and Tait felt like calling for help.

Forbes forsook all the modulations of

diplomacy and cut straight to the point. "Ambassador Tait, why don't you like me?"

"Why I—I admire you immensely," he gasped, amazed.

"You love Capt. Forbes, don't you?" Persis lunged at his heart again; and he answered, solemnly: "Yes, I do, as if he were my own son."

"Why don't you want me to see him?" "Why do you want to see him? You're married."

"But they don't keep women in harems nowadays. Paris is very dull this winter. Don't take Capt. Forbes away again."

"As I remember, you gave him marching orders once yourself. You mustn't mind if he goes of his own accord now."

"But he won't go of his own accord if you don't make him. Why do you? You're not afraid of me?"

"Oh, but I am."

Persis laughed with a kind of pride. "Really? You flatter me! But why?"

Tait twisted his big, soft hands together and stared at her a long while before he could speak. "This is very embarrassing, Mrs. Enslave, but since you are so frank, let me ask you one question. Will you answer it frankly?"

"That depends upon the question," Persis chuckled, never dreaming of its nature. When it came it was:

"Are you in love with Capt. Forbes?"

"Are you in love with Capt. Forbes?" "I think he is very nice," she dodged. "But what has that to do with our friendship?"

"Friendship?" Tait exclaimed, with bitterness. "In my day, Mrs. Enslave, I have seen some of the proudest families

in New York dragged into the mire of public shame by tragedies that began as innocent experiments in friendship. Don't risk it, Mrs. Enslave. You are on dangerous ground."

She mused aloud. "And you think he loves me?"

A gesture of disgust escaped the Ambassador. "How long could such love remain innocent when it begins by being unlawful?"

"But I love him," she insisted. "And he loves me with all his heart. Some day, I presume—the coming sorrow cast its shadow over her already—some day, no doubt, he'll find somebody he loves more, and he'll marry her. He can have any body now; but when he came to me he was poor; he needed money. But I also needed money. Things have changed. Money has come to him, as it always comes, too late. But that's no reason for robbing me of my chance for a little while of happiness. And you mustn't—oh, you mustn't rob him of the happiness I could give him!"

"But, my good woman—my dear girl—you had your chance; you made your choice. You must pay the price. You can't all have the love we want. I can't. You can't."

Persis laid her hand on his arm. "But why? Why?"

"Such a love as yours is against the great unwritten laws of society."

Persis would not be crushed with precepts. She sneered: "Society? Is anybody on the square. Why shouldn't we be happy in our own way?"

Tait hesitated, then answered coldly: "There are ten thousand reasons, Mrs. Enslave. I'll give you the one that will appeal to you most strongly: 'You're bound to get found out.'"

She blushed at this facet. "Don't speak to me as though I were a criminal!"

He struck out again. "Then don't become one. You have to fight to love. It is a simple question of duty."

She had no refuge but a prayer. "I implore you not to break my heart."

Tait donned in manner the black cap of a judge. "Such hearts as yours ought to be broken, Mrs. Enslave, for the health of the world."